



The development and growing role of non-state actors in international relations

Mahima Pandey

Research Scholar, Department of Political Science, Chaudhary Charan Singh University, Meerut, Uttar Pradesh, India

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.66856/ijhssr.2026.12.3.12349>

Abstract

This paper examines the growing role of Non-State Actors (NSAs) in contemporary international relations. For a long time, states were treated as the main actors in global affairs, using political authority, economic resources, and military power to pursue their interests. Non-state actors have transformed the international system, as globalization, technological development, and the rapid movement of people, information, and capital have created space for many other actors to influence global affairs. Multinational corporations, NGOs, international organizations, and influential individuals now participate in policymaking, human rights advocacy, international cooperation, and global governance. Their contributions can be significant, although their influence often involves complex challenges. NSAs may support cooperation and raise important global concerns, while some may also create problems related to accountability, legitimacy, inequality, and security. The paper therefore looks at both sides of their growing influence. It highlights that understanding international relations today requires attention to actors beyond the traditional state-centered framework.

Keywords: Non-state actors, international relations, globalization, multinational corporations, NGOs, global governance

Introduction

International relations are changing rapidly as globalization, digital communication, technological development, and the growing movement of people, information, and resources across national borders have connected countries and societies more closely than before. In the past, states were seen as the central actors in international relations because they controlled political authority, security, and foreign policy. They still remain important; however, governments need more support to survive in world politics. A growing number of non-state actors, including multinational corporations, international organizations, NGOs, media networks, think tanks, and influential individuals, now participate in global affairs. They cross national boundaries and contribute to policymaking. Their growing presence has changed international relations. Their growing importance is worth studying because these actors do more than simply support states and intergovernmental organizations. In some situations, they become independent centers of influence. A large corporation can affect economic decisions. An international NGO can bring attention to a humanitarian crisis. Media networks can shape public discussions almost instantly. Think tanks can influence policy debates through research and expertise. As Joseph Nye argues, contemporary world politics is not shaped only by military and economic power. Soft power, information, and networks have also become important. Non-state actors operate strongly in these areas; moreover, their influence is not always positive or equal. Some may contribute to cooperation and multi-level global governance, while others can deepen inequality, challenge state authority, or create new difficulties for international stability. Therefore, understanding current international relations requires multiple sources of support for governments. The world has more actors now; their roles overlap, compete, and sometimes cooperate. Studying these changing relationships helps explain how international decisions are increasingly made today. The study of non-state actors and their international activities has often

remained at the margins of International Relations. Coggins (2015), for example, introduced the idea of “rebel diplomacy”, showing that rebel groups can engage in diplomatic activities to advance their interests. Arves, Cunningham, and McCulloch (2019) further observed that non-state armed actors, including rebel groups, use public diplomacy to present their causes and gain wider support. It is not always conventional diplomacy, but it matters. Drawing on examples from the Middle East, Darwich (2021) ^[5] argued that Foreign Policy Analysis should also examine the foreign-policy behavior of non-state armed actors. Another important contribution comes from Keck and Sikkink, whose theory of transnational advocacy networks explains how NGOs, activists, international organizations, and other groups work across borders. They use information, symbolic politics, political leverage, and accountability strategies to influence policy. Goodman similarly examines multinational corporations and international NGOs, arguing that states and non-state actors are closely connected through wider processes of transnational contestation.

Research Objectives & Methodology

This study examines how non-state actors are changing present international relations. NGOs, transnational advocacy networks, and multinational corporations increasingly participate in global policymaking, economic governance, and norm development. They use information, advocacy, networks, and public pressure to influence decisions beyond traditional state structures. The study also looks at the challenges created by their growing role, particularly accountability, legitimacy, transparency, and representation. Their influence is expanding, but it raises concerns. This study uses a qualitative, analytical research methodology. The research relies primarily on secondary sources, including peer-reviewed journal articles, academic books and book chapters, scholarly research on global governance, publications from international organizations,

policy documents, institutional reports, and relevant academic literature on NGOs, MNCs, and transnational networks.

Types of Non-State Actors and their Roles

Non-state actors are classified into several broad categories, including international intergovernmental organizations (IGOs), transnational non-governmental organizations (NGOs), sub-state actors, super-empowered individuals, multinational corporations (MNCs), and terrorist organizations. Nation-states create IGOs, which generally receive formal government support. NGOs are different. Individuals, professionals, business groups, and other social forces form them. Usually, they are private, voluntary, self-governing, non-profit, and focused on particular tasks or interests. They have no formal legal ties with nation-states and therefore generally work independently. The concept of a non-state actor is relatively simple to understand. It refers to a non-sovereign individual or organization that can exercise economic, political, or social influence. Sometimes, the influence is local. Sometimes, it reaches far beyond national borders. A corporation can influence investment and trade decisions, while an NGO may bring human rights or environmental concerns into international discussions. Super-empowered individuals can also shape public debates through media and digital platforms. Their activities are not confined to one country. An organization may have its headquarters in one state but operate across many others. This cross-border character makes non-state actors an important part of contemporary international relations, though their growing influence also raises questions about accountability and control.

Intergovernmental Organizations (IGOs)

Intergovernmental Organizations (IGOs) are formed by three or more nation-states to deal with common problems and shared interests. States create and join these organizations because some issues are difficult to handle alone. It becomes easier when countries meet, discuss the problem, and make collective decisions. In this regard, IGOs provide both authority and a platform for international cooperation. IGOs can broadly be divided into global and regional organizations. Global IGOs have wide or near-universal membership and address issues affecting the international community. Key examples include the United Nations (UN), the World Trade Organization (WTO), and the International Monetary Fund (IMF). Regional IGOs, by contrast, bring together countries from a particular geographical region or those sharing certain interests. The European Union (EU) and Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) are well-known examples. The basic idea behind creating an IGO is quite practical. States need to communicate, negotiate, and make sure that other members respect their commitments. Working together can also reduce the cost and difficulty of dealing with international problems. For instance, the WTO provides a framework for trade negotiations and settling trade disputes, which would be much harder if every country had to manage these matters separately. But IGOs are not only about solving problems. Sometimes, they simply provide a place to talk. The UN General Assembly is a good example. States meet there to debate international concerns and discuss matters affecting peace, security and cooperation. Similarly, ASEAN encourages economic, social and cultural

cooperation among its member states. In simple terms, IGOs bring countries to the same table, even when they do not always agree.

Multinational Corporations (MNCs)

Multinational Corporations (MNCs) are companies headquartered in one country but operating and investing across many parts of the world. They have a global reach, with branches, offices, and subsidiaries in different states. Over the past few decades, MNCs have grown into powerful actors in international affairs. Some are enormous; Walmart, for instance, records annual sales running into hundreds of billions of dollars, giving it financial resources that can exceed those of some international organizations. The United Nations, despite being the largest IGO, operates with a much smaller budget than some major MNCs. Their power still does not match that of states, but their influence can be felt in policy-making and economic decisions. MNCs often operate beyond national borders and are mainly guided by business interests and the expectations of international shareholders. Profit matters. At the same time, their presence can benefit host countries by creating jobs, attracting investment, and supporting local economic activity. In this way, MNCs have become important players in the global economy, although they do not always act according to the interests of a particular state.

Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs)

Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) are private, voluntary, self-governing, and non-profit organizations that work around particular causes or social concerns. Governments do not control them, although their independence from governments, businesses, and other outside influences can vary. Some are small and work locally, while others operate across countries and have a much wider reach. Their funding, working methods, and areas of activity also differ from one organization to another. NGOs can perform many roles. They may implement development projects, provide humanitarian services, defend human rights, protect the environment or promote particular social causes. International NGOs are often formed by individuals who come together around shared values and concerns. They raise issues that cross national borders. Common examples include human rights, disarmament, environmental protection, and the welfare of women and children. Their influence extends beyond direct action. NGOs often try to shape public opinion and encourage governments to respond to issues of wider public concern. They also share expertise with international organizations and participate in discussions where global agreements are being developed. In many cases, their knowledge and advocacy help put neglected issues on the international agenda. Take Amnesty International. Its campaigns have highlighted human rights violations and helped broaden acceptance of international human rights norms. Similarly, WWF works on wildlife conservation and environmental protection. Other NGOs focus on freedom of expression, LGBT rights, protection of civilians during armed conflicts, and environmental restoration. Their influence may not come from military or economic power, but from ideas, public support, and collective action.

Impact of Non-State Actor

Non-State Actors (NSAs), especially human rights advocacy organizations, play several important positive roles. Their activities include informing the public about human rights and monitoring how international standards are implemented. They do not merely stay outside the system; in many cases, they become involved in the process themselves. Yet their influence does not always come through a seat at the negotiating table; information can be highly effective, too. By gathering and disseminating information, NSAs raise public awareness and promote greater transparency. As a result, they can pressure governments and international organizations to address problems that would otherwise go unnoticed. These organizations also support peacebuilding and protect vulnerable communities. For example, the Center on Housing Rights and Evictions has participated in initiatives related to the international protection of individuals and communities, including in Kosovo. The work of such groups shows how non-state organizations can help achieve peace and legal protection in practice. Another significant function is enforcing international law. NGOs can help incorporate international norms into national legal systems, particularly where they previously helped develop those norms. They can also lower enforcement costs through self-regulation and professional oversight. Moreover, their supervisory role matters because they can monitor how states implement international conventions, document violations, use the media to expose abuses, and raise concerns with domestic or UN monitoring bodies. In this way, NSAs help make international standards more visible and, in some cases, more effective.

Non-State Actors (NSAs) can play both positive and negative roles in international relations. Their negative role becomes particularly visible when their activities threaten human rights, public order, or national and international security. The problem is that NSAs exist in many forms, so it is not always easy to determine who should be held responsible for their actions. In some situations, governments, especially authoritarian regimes, may use NSAs to avoid direct international responsibility. A state may finance, train, or equip informal militias and other groups to act against opposition movements, minorities, or political activists. Sometimes the relationship is direct, through contracts or formal arrangements. At other times, it is much less visible. Governments may simply allow groups that share their ideology to carry out abuses such as arbitrary arrests, torture or killings without meaningful intervention. It creates a difficult legal situation. The state may deny involvement, while the victims still face serious violations. But NSAs do not always act on behalf of governments. Some groups operate independently and may themselves abuse their power against particular communities or individuals. In such cases, proving direct state responsibility becomes difficult. International law generally places primary responsibility on states, although some international legal instruments recognize obligations relating to non-state groups. International humanitarian law provides an important example, as it can apply directly to organized armed groups involved in armed conflicts. The wide variety of NSAs makes it difficult to establish a single rule of responsibility. Still, states remain central because they possess the authority to regulate, criminalize, and penalize harmful activities within their jurisdiction.

Therefore, preventing the adverse actions of NSAs often depends heavily on effective state oversight. Without it, accountability can become blurred, and serious abuses may go unchecked.

Conclusion

The changing nature of international relations in recent decades has been accompanied by the growing importance of non-state actors (NSAs), broadening understanding of global governance and international policymaking. Although states continue to hold formal authority with sovereignty, security, and foreign policy, actors such as multinational corporations, non-governmental organizations, advocacy networks, international organizations, and influential persons increasingly participate in forming international affairs. Their capacity to operate across national borders, mobilise resources, build transnational networks, and communicate information rapidly has made them important participants in economic, political, social, environmental, and humanitarian processes. Consequently, contemporary international relations can no longer be examined entirely from a state-centered perspective. The growing participation of NSAs presents both opportunities and challenges. They can drive policy innovation, promote human rights, raise public awareness, support humanitarian initiatives, and address issues that governments or intergovernmental institutions may not be able to manage effectively on their own. At the same time, their growing influence raises important questions about accountability, legitimacy, transparency, and regulation. The activities of powerful corporations, advocacy groups, transnational networks, and other actors shall sometimes create tensions with public interests or national priorities. These developments demonstrate the need for institutional mechanisms that can encourage the constructive participation of NSAs while guaranteeing appropriate standards pertaining to accountability and oversight. Overall, the rise of NSAs reflects the increasingly complex and interconnected character of the contemporary international system. Their influence does not necessarily replace the central role of states; rather, it adds new dimensions to the ways in which international strategies and outcomes are shaped. A complete understanding of global affairs therefore necessitates focus on the interaction between states and a diverse range of non-state actors. As global challenges increasingly cross national boundaries, effective international governance will depend on cooperation, coordination, and conversations among governments, international institutions, civil society, businesses, and other relevant actors.

References

1. Arves S, Cunningham KG. Rebel tactics and external public opinion, n.d.
2. Clapham A. Non-state actors. Social Science Research Network. SSRN, n.d.
3. Coggins BL. Rebel diplomacy: Theorizing violent non-state actors' strategies of talk, n.d.
4. D'Anieri P. International politics: Power and purpose in global affairs. Wadsworth Publishing, 2009.
5. Darwich M. Foreign policy analysis and armed non-state actors in world politics: Lessons from the Middle East. Foreign Policy Analysis, 2021, 17(4).

6. Nye JS Jr. Soft power: The means to success in world politics. PublicAffairs. Joseph Nye – Soft Power, 2004.
7. Scholte JA. Globalization: A critical introduction. Palgrave Macmillan. Publisher page, 2005.
8. Union of International Associations. Types of international organizations. Union of International Associations, n.d.
9. United Nations Security Council. Resolution 1540 (2004): Non-proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, 2004.
10. Waltz KN. Theory of international politics. McGraw-Hill, 1979.
11. Weiss TG, Seyle DC, Coolidge K. The rise of non-state actors in global governance: Opportunities and limitations. One Earth Future Foundation. Report, 2013.
12. Willetts P. Non-governmental organizations in world politics. Routledge. Routledge, 2011.